

# Reminiscences of a game warden

*by Chris Johnson*

I have worked on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge for the past 12 years as a law enforcement officer. My actual title is 'Refuge Officer' but I am often referred to as a "Game Warden." As you can guess, I have all sorts of tales from my adventures and have heard all kinds of excuses and reasons from people about why they have broken the rules. I will share a few of my stories with you. As I sit down to write this article I have to laugh and shake my head as I recall some of these incidents, and this in turn reminds me of other incidents. I will try to keep this article to just a few stories and if readers enjoy the topic, I am sure that I can find a few more to tell in a future article.

It was late fall on the Kenai River just below Skilak Lake. It was spitting snow and about 20°. I was hiding in the bushes, and I observed a man land a large rainbow trout. I watched him kill the fish and put it in his boat. I decided to contact the man at Lower Skilak boat ramp. The season for rainbows was open and the only requirement was that if you retained a rainbow over 20 inches, it had to be recorded on the back of your fishing license. Well, I contacted the man at the boat ramp, and he told me he had not caught any fish. I searched his boat high and low because I knew he had kept the fish. While I was searching the boat, the man was squirming around a lot. I thought he was really nervous about something or real cold. Well, after about 15 minutes the guy couldn't handle it anymore and told me the fish I was looking for was down his pants. The man opened up his pants and pulled a 24-inch rainbow trout out of his pant leg. He had failed to record the fish on his license and was afraid that I was going to take the fish from him. I gave him a pen.

In this next story the moose gets its revenge and shoots back. I responded to a call about a sub-legal moose found dead off of Marathon Road. I hiked into the kill area with a state protection officer and the reporting parties. The protection officer and I proceeded to start quartering and skinning the moose in the hopes of recovering a bullet. As we finished with each quarter of the moose, we moved it out of our way. We finished skinning and examining a hindquarter with the hoof attached and moved it over to our pile of already examined meat. About three feet from that

location, one of the reporting parties had set his rifle down against a tree stump. We set the examined quarter down and then started working on another quarter. About two minutes later a shot rang out and tree bark splattered all around us. One of the reporting parties dropped to the ground like he had been shot. My first thought was that one of the reporting parties had shot at us. My next thought was that we were under fire from somebody claiming the moose. After several minutes we were able to sort out that the rifle leaning against the tree stump had gone off, after the hoof of the moose quarter we had just moved fell and hit the safety and the trigger. The man that dropped like he had been shot actually had been hit by tree bark and was OK. After that I got down on my knees and prayed.

I was working in the Kenai Russian River Ferry area, and I was in uniform standing right behind this guy that had a snagged fish on his line. The man landed the fish and then clubbed it. He took the hook out of its tail and put the hook in its mouth. He then unhooked the fish and turned around to put the fish in his backpack. Well, when he turned around and saw me standing there, his eyes got as big as saucers and that fish went about twenty feet in the air and came right back down on top of the surprised snagger.

To combat the illegal and dangerous practice of hunters shooting from their vehicle or on or across a road, I use a decoy grouse set up just off the road. When a hunter comes along and shoots at my bird, I pop out of the trees and have a little meeting with the hunter and we discuss the merits of shooting from their vehicle or from or across the road. One afternoon I set my decoy up on Swanson River Road; along comes a car and out pops a guy with a .22 rifle. He stands right in the center of the road and opens fire on the decoy. I come out of the trees yelling, "Game Warden, put your gun down!" The guy does not hear me. He's got tunnel vision, and all he can do is keep shooting at this bird like it was coming to eat him. He fires 14 rounds and then starts to reload before I can get him convinced that the bird was not going to eat him.

It has been fun reminiscing about old times.

Retelling these stories has jogged my memory of other incidents. Other officers have reminded me of other stories and similar situations, in which they have been involved. Until next time, remember to bring a child hunting or fishing. Share the experience. They are our future!

*Chris Johnson has been a law enforcement officer on the Kenai National Wildlife Refuge since 1989. He and his wife Pam live in Sterling with their three children. For more information about the Refuge, visit the headquarters on Ski Hill Road in Soldotna, call 262-7021 or see the website at <http://www.fws.gov/refuge/kenai/>.*